

3. The American Missionary Association and Black Congregationalism in the Southeast

Of all the rich, discernibly distinct traditions to be found in the Southeast Conference of the UCC, none may be beloved more by its adherents than the African-American Congregational churches founded by, or else related to, the American Missionary Association. The story of the Conference would be grossly incomplete without reference to their witness in word and deed to their communities, a witness that entails salvation and uplift alike.

The AMA was a descendant of several abolitionist societies and assumed the task of educating those freed by the victory of Union forces over the Confederacy, whose entire existence was predicated upon the maintenance of the so-called “peculiar institution” of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox Court House in Virginia in April 1865 opened the door for the long-prepared, long-awaited influx of missionaries under the AMA’s aegis to move southward for the purpose of establishing academies, some of which eventually became colleges.

What truly made the AMA’s approach distinct from more secular initiatives such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and the (much later) Rosenwald Schools on the one hand, and competing religious groups such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian mission work on the other was the almost-total symbiotic fusion between the intellectual and the spiritual in that very few churches did not have a very close relationship between an adjoining academy, and vice versa.

Development in subsequent decades produced a distinct hybrid of sorts between the serenity and mission-oriented piety typical of Northern Protestantism and the vibrancy and stirring preaching and music in worship typified by the Southern Black church at large. Both elements were modified, and modified each other, in varying degrees, to produce the life and witness of the 14 congregations of this tradition still affiliated with the UCC as of the early 2020s.

Much like the beginnings of Christianity among others of African descent in the South, Blacks first encountered Congregationalism on the plantation churches such as Midway in Georgia. The chronicler of Midway Church, James Stacy (1830-1912), posits a freed slave conducting worship in a brush arbor on Sundays between the two regular worship services beginning sometime in the late 1780s.¹ It would take twenty years or so, though, before the small group of slaves would receive a building of its

own from the largesse of Midway's members, with Congregationalists and Methodists supervising the preaching.² By 1811, several of the more prosperous members offered their premises for worship and teaching, with a full-fledged superintendency to supervise them.³

This continued until the high-minded Charles Colcock Jones (1804-1863) came to the Midway pastorate around 1831, whereupon he embarked on a more aggressive program to educate and supervise the religious activities of the slaves. Of course, Jones encountered resistance from certain of the White members, fearing that slaves might interpret Bible stories such as the Exodus and the Gospels as encouraging (in their minds) undue notions of self-worth, which might potentially inspire revolts and runaways.⁴ But Jones spent the rest of the decade formalizing the catechismal sessions, hampered mainly by Georgia laws forbidding teaching reading to slaves.⁵ In 1835, the elaborate scheme, with several layers of accountability, boasted some 450 pupils.⁶ That number increased eventually to around 650 or so by the end of Jones' pastorate in 1848.⁷

To a large degree, Midway's concern for the African-American was fairly uncommon, paternalistic though it would be to modern eyes. The Presbyterian/Congregational Puritanism of that congregation practically demanded education as a divine obligation, a conviction that was lacking in other communions driven by the revivalism of the Great Awakenings, where otherworldliness was the dominant tone espoused by White ministers. Picking up on the spiritual comforts of revivalist Protestantism, with reassurances of a favorable Godly judgment that would one day reverse their degraded, painful condition if they remained faithful to the leading and saving redemption of Christ but without the emphasis Whites placed on passages like Romans 13 and others stressing subordination to authority, slaves fashioned a more emotionalized, fervent version of the faith amongst themselves. Scholars of recent times have generally attributed it to the need for identity formation, to keep themselves together under the brutal conditions in which they lived. Whatever the motivation, Midway's pastors and elites sought to channel and sublimate that energy, only partly to deflect the risks of revolt. The other motivation was undoubtedly a guilty conscience, felt below the level of consciousness, since it was only with the greatest effort that Midway's members, certainly versed in the Bible and the "liberal arts" (humanities), could square their regard for human worth with the economic necessity of unpaid labor that the large-scale cash-crop system of the plantation entailed.

As the legal vice upon slaves by Southern state governments grew tighter and tighter with many Whites abandoning even token concern like that found at Midway for

those in bondage, sentiments north of the Mason-Dixon line favoring abolition grew more and more inflamed, with the AMA taking a then-drastic stand against churches soft on slavery, defining it as a sin no less ruinous to a Christian people than liquor, tobacco, gambling, and illicit sexual behavior. Generous donors supplied the money to get the schools off on a good foot when conditions became ripe for their founding.

Justice was deeply embedded in the DNA of the AMA, but so was piety. Two generations of ministers who had profound connections to the tradition, Joseph Taylor Stanley and Alfred Knighton “Tony” Stanley, wrote successive books in 1978 and 1979, both of which are indispensable as introductions to the heritage and work of the AMA among Southern Blacks. Father Taylor and son Tony were educated in Congregational-related institutions, and deeply imbibed the curriculum of self-discipline, vigorous intellectualism, and moral and social uplift found in those institutions. One could not truly improve upon Tony Stanley’s description of the AMA found in his *The Children is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People*:

At its inception, the American Missionary Association was not primarily an educational society. It was an agency for missionary endeavor and was organized primarily to extend the gospel...

Since the propagation of the gospel was (the) “philosophical base” upon which the American Missionary Association was founded, the AMA schools were a means to that end. These schools became an expression of the mission of the association, but they were never regarded as ends in themselves ...

The association and the denomination felt, therefore, that their goal could be attained only through an extensive program of education, which would prepare Freedmen [*sic*—who were of a peculiar religion, culture, and past—for responsible membership in Congregational churches and for free citizenship in a theocratic society. Hence, the schools preceded the church and were to function as auxiliaries of the church. Not only was the slogan “Equal brotherhood [*sic*] in the family of Christ” a democratic ideal that could be achieved by secular education for citizenship in a democratic society, but it was also theocratic, and its ultimate attainment could be reached only when people professed this kinship in the Congregational kind of expression of the church of Christ.⁸

Tony Stanley, who was a long-tenured pastor at Peoples Congregational UCC in Washington and an early mentor to Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson, had a thoroughly vested interest in such a conception of society, imbued into him at an early age by his parents, Taylor and Kathryn Turrentine Stanley. The senior Stanleys were the husband and wife who directed Congregational work among Southern

Blacks from the 1940s until the 1960s. In his 1978 memoir, *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South*, Taylor corroborated and complemented his son's rendering of the motivation and result of the AMA educational and religious mission:

For the most part they were true, New England-type Congregational churches, because they were organized initially by New England-type Congregational ministers and missionaries. The first pastors were white; the first Sunday school teachers were missionaries in AMA schools. Many churches were proud to be *the First* Congregational Church in their community or city. Others chose names of northern churches and of famous Congregationalists: Plymouth, Pilgrim, Broadway, Chandler, Beard, Beecher, Gregory, Howard, Hubbard, Woodbury. All started as Congregational churches, indoctrinated with Congregational principles. Their covenants and constitutions (if any) were patterned after northern churches. They adhered to the *Congregational Manual* as to organization, structure, sacraments, and ordinances of the church.

Early Congregational missionaries made every attempt to evangelize; they made no attempt to proselytize. At evangelistic services converts were asked to choose the church they would attend, and many chose Baptist or Methodist churches. Intelligence in worship, in the understanding of the Bible, and in the application of truth in matters of personal conduct and social intercourse was emphasized. These churches became "lighthouses" in their respective communities, and although often accused of being quiet, unemotional, and highbrow, they furnished far more than their share of community leadership in education, in moral uplift, and in economic and social progress, as well as in the ministries of the church.⁹

Those reflect an understandably biased view of the AMA experience. In a more detached and critical vein, Florida State University historian Joe M. Richardson rendered the early teachers and ministers as filled with contempt at the supposedly chaotic, unregenerate state of Black religion as it emerged from the throes of slavery. Richardson said, "Most AMA workers never fathomed the slave's religion, which emphasized joy and collective hope rather than personal guilt and self-denial."¹⁰ Hard work on the part of teacher and pupil and minister and layperson alike would be required to effect the synthesis that would hold together the AMA mission in what Tony Stanley termed "the land of poetry and song"¹¹ in order for the principle of Congregational order to give its distinctive shape to the primal fervor of Black religious expression.

Much like what happened to the American Home Missionary Society among Whites, the AMA was originally supported by a variety of Protestant denominations, mainly of

Anglo-Saxon descent and of Calvinist doctrine, until they pulled out one by one to establish their own denominational programs to minister to Southern Blacks. So even with the initial reluctance on the part of some AMA officials, Congregationalism would become the fledgling churches' affiliation by default.

In the present territory of the Southeast Conference, between 1865 and 1931 (the date of the Congregational merger with the Christian Connection), according to Richard Taylor's *Southern Congregational Churches*, some 150 churches were founded for Blacks. Of those, only 38, or 25 percent, of them survived into the Congregational Christian period. But a different set of circumstances played into the lack of translation of Black Congregationalism into a mass movement throughout the South. Again, Richardson diagnosed some of the cause in the reluctance surrounding the church extension portion of the mission as the AMA, "hoping to avoid offending black denominations, organized Congregational churches slowly and circumspectly,"¹² despite having plenteous funds and perhaps personnel to be more aggressive. Those that were founded were not particularly successful in gaining large numbers of recruits, requiring heavy AMA subsidy for the few that did exist, eventually draining off resources that could have been used for further expansion.¹³ Other issues related to the public perception of the movement as cold, aloof, and obsessed with worldly matters. In turn, the AMA missionaries perceived the indigenous emotionalism of the freed people as little short of paganism and that a homegrown ministry was to blame, with no training in the proprieties of Anglo-American Christendom. One key to addressing the problem was the theological departments in the new academies and colleges, such as Fisk in Tennessee, Talladega in Alabama, Atlanta University in Georgia, and Tougaloo in Mississippi, with promising new graduates who might yet carve the niche needed to make Congregationalism a publicly viable option among those aspiring to more formality and a higher social status than was associated with the overwhelming Baptist and Methodist majority. Plain class suspicions drove much of the tensions in the early years, as well as a lingering distaste for White leadership, upon which the early AMA Congregational churches were dependent for at least the first generation. In any case, Richardson remarked bluntly,

... Congregationalism was never a national church. It was not indigenous to the South. Most blacks had never heard of it. Even though they quickly separated from southern whites, blacks frequently remained in the same denominations. The Presbyterians who did much less educational and church work than the A.M.A. gained more members because they were better known ...¹⁴

But none of those handicaps deterred the founders of the numerous congregations from attempting to construct this fairly unique intellectual-religious synthesis, one

whose defining characteristics are often more intuited than defined with any precision. When one visits most of the AMA-heritage churches in the Conference today, one is struck by the similarity in worship structure to the “mainline” Anglo-Saxon tradition (e.g., Methodist, Presbyterian, other UCC) and the relatively staid singing. But the preaching and the sentiment among the people is anything but cold or reserved, and the welcome extended to visitors is quite hearty. This conveys the character of the churches possessing a Puritan/Congregational base with modifications reflecting the mainstream of American Black religion, usually with regional customs embedded within.

On January 1, 1966, 20 churches from an AMA background joined the Southeast Conference. As of 2023, 14 still remain affiliated. The memberships range from 427 at Atlanta’s First Congregational Church to 15 at Trinity Congregational Church in Athens, Alabama, according to that year’s *United Church of Christ Year Book*. The average membership per congregation is 74 souls, with Montgomery, Alabama’s First Congregational Christian Church coming the closest to the average with its faithful of 87.

Statistics by no means tell the story of the vitality of this movement, however, and its profound witness unto their communities and the 40 other congregations of the SEC. This will remain the case for decades to come, if the commitment and vitality of most of the churches is taken into account.

This writer highly encourages the reader to find out more about African-Americans in the present-day UCC and its forebears through these four books:

1. Joyce Hollyday, *On the Heels of Freedom: The American Missionary Association’s Bold Campaign to Educate Minds, Open Hearts, and Heal the Soul of a Divided Nation* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).
2. J. Taylor Stanley, *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South* (New York: United Church Press, 1978).
3. A. Knighton Stanley, *The Children Is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People* (New York and Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1979).
4. Yvonne Delk, ed., *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2023).

NOTES

1. James Stacy, *History and Published Records of the Midway Congregational Church, Liberty County, Georgia* (1903: repr. Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1979), 164-165.
2. *Ibid.*, 166.
3. *Ibid.*, 166-167.
4. *Ibid.*, 170.
5. *Ibid.*, 170-171.
6. *Ibid.*, 172.
7. *Ibid.*
8. A. Knighton Stanley, *The Children Is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People* (New York and Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1979), 39-41.
9. J. Taylor Stanley, *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South* (New York: United Church Press, 1978), 44-45.
10. Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (1986: repr. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 143.
11. A. Knighton Stanley, 48.
12. Joe M. Richardson, "The Failure of the American Missionary Association to Expand Congregationalism Among Southern Blacks." *Southern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 58.
13. *Ibid.*, 59.
14. *Ibid.*, 66.